

A Fragment of Life Experience

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(Translated from Tibetan by Kati Fitzgerald)

This country, one of the most powerful and prosperous on earth, a political force standing above all other nations, this so-called ‘Land of Opportunity,’ nevertheless has dishonest and crooked laws. I encountered one such law in a situation that made my heart shiver with cold and turned my breath jagged, causing me sleepless nights, tossing and turning with doubts. Unable to control my racing thoughts, I tried to fix this ailment in my heart by listening to Milarepa’s songs of realization, etc. Realizing that others may have had similar experiences, I decided to write this essay.

I moved to New York in 1999 and lived there for a long time. Then I was still young, so I woke up early, went to bed late, and worked with diligence. In 2005, I bought a one-bedroom apartment in Sunnyside. In America, buying a house is the sign that you have made it in life. Because of the nice environment, the convenience of the location, the quality of the apartment, and especially because my best girlfriends were all nearby, I felt at that time that this was really my home.

However, in 2012, I had to move to Boston for work. We stayed in our New York apartment occasionally when we traveled and when my husband needed medical treatments. When we first arrived in Boston, we met a few new Tibetan people, who gave us a warm and sincere welcome. Eventually, they asked us to lend them the apartment when

they needed to go to New York. “Kelsang la, please lend us your keys.” Slowly over time, I ended up lending out my keys to people I didn’t even know. Although the building rules stipulated that only two people could stay in the residence, I came to find out that there were sometimes up to fifteen people staying in the apartment. Not knowing how to say no to my friends, I decided that I would begin renting out the apartment as a way of being able to refuse them. For a few years, I rented out the apartment and was flush with cash. When the two-year lease expired, the renter moved out of state. I then entered into another two-year contract with a single tenant named Marianne. After a year and a half, Marianne told me, “I got a new boyfriend. He and I are planning to move in together in a new place.” Additionally, she requested that because she still had six months left on the lease, that I would allow her mother, who was suffering from breast cancer, to stay in the apartment. She gave a very persuasive soliloquy. Marianne and her mother owned a salon on 43rd Ave and 47th St. Because they were local people, I trusted them and agreed. However, later I came to discover that the woman who was staying in the apartment was in fact not Marianne’s mother but some other acquaintance of hers. I couldn’t have imagined that she would trick me like this. After six months, this other woman called me and said that she received government housing assistance and would be moving.

The plan was for me to personally collect the keys on March 5, 2023, but something came up and I was not able to go to New York. I told the tenant to leave the keys with the building super, Julianne, which she did. On the night of March 9th, I went to New York to show the apartment to a real estate agent, and when I took the keys and opened the door, I found it empty save for a few scattered items. The glass of one cabinet was broken, and the walls were scratched. The hall looked like

an ancient ruin. The bathroom and kitchen were filled with bad odors. The place was replete with cockroaches, and no corner was left clean.

In the early morning of the 10th, I went with a different real estate agent to show the apartment, but when I tried the door, I couldn't open it. My surrounding neighbors tried to help me, but to no avail. I thought it was strange that I could open the door last night but not this morning. All of a sudden, four or five young New York City cops appeared with the sound of heavy footsteps. With a loud voice, one asked me what I was doing there. I said, "I'm the landlord. I just opened the door yesterday, but today I'm unable to open the door. I want to put this house on the market, so I came to show the apartment to a real estate agent." As soon as the police officer arrived, the door popped open.

Unexpectedly, out of my apartment came a frightening man with a nasty face, more than 6 feet tall, with a shiny bald spot on the top of his head, some of the long hairs on the back of his head frizzy and loose on the nape of his neck. He looked to be around 40 or 50 years old, shaking his head and giving me a scowl, he said with a growl, "I live here. This woman is trying to break in." He wailed to the cops angrily and with agitation. I couldn't believe my eyes, and I became speechless. Not only did he have keys to the apartment, but he also had an envelope with the apartment's address on it. He repeated to the cops, "This is my apartment. I don't know this woman at all." The cops yelled at me, "Give us evidence of your ownership of this apartment." Luckily, I had the monthly mortgage statements on my phone, which I showed to them. The older cop grimaced and said, "This won't stand as proof of ownership. If you don't get out of here immediately, I'm going to throw you in jail." Even though I already knew that they would

not be any help in solving this issue, I still wanted to ask a question, so I asked, “Respected Police Officer, I have a question. If his being in possession of a set of keys and an envelope with this apartment’s address on it is adequate proof of his rights, then why are my set of keys and mortgage documents inadequate?” The older police officer was left completely speechless. There was one Chinese police officer, who went directly into the apartment with confidence and comforted the squatter, “You’re okay, right?” Turning to me, he said with arrogance, “You’re not allowed to cross this threshold.” Thinking that I was Chinese, he was pretending not to be Chinese, but anyone with eyes could see that he was Chinese. Anyway, I was amazed by the fact that not only could they evict but even throw the rightful owner of a property in jail. I was rendered speechless when I saw the terrifying laws of these New York police officers. A younger white officer off to the side said, “I’ll give you some legal advice. Because he’s obviously been living here for more than a month, he has already become a legal tenant. The best solution is for the landlord and tenant to go to court. Maybe you’ll be compensated for damages.” How strange! You can be charged with trespassing on your own property—this is the first time in my life I had ever heard or seen such a thing, so I was confused. I felt so sad. All sorts of thoughts appeared in my mind, and for a moment, I was as still as a painting.

Then I called the former tenant, and she said, “This is impossible!” She arrived with some people from her church. Finally, it turned out that that man was her ex-boyfriend, and when he had come recently to help her move, he must have made a copy of the keys. She acted like she couldn’t do anything about the situation. Although I called the cops again and spoke with them, there was nothing they could do. I had become helpless. Although saddened, I controlled my emotions and resolved to

take the matter to court. In this powerful country of America, it must be that there are honest and upright laws that can distinguish between the truth and lies. And even though those police officers were crooked, it is impossible that there is no other court of law in which to plead one's case. Having faith in an honest trial that distinguishes between truth and falsehoods under the rule of law, I thought I would certainly get my apartment back from the hands of this person, so I calmed down.

Then I hastily searched for an affordable lawyer who worked on landlord-tenant disputes. I was introduced to a lawyer by my real estate agent, who would take the case for \$3000. The lawyer was a woman named Silviya. On April 6, 2023, she began the procedures. First, a 90-day notice had to be sent. The lawyer told me confidently, "He'll definitely vacate by then." I initially felt relieved, but 90 days passed, and he still hadn't left. Now we needed to file a formal complaint in court. The lawyer's fees were \$450 per hour. When I asked her approximately how many hours would be needed, she said she wouldn't be able to estimate. In my opinion, this was too dangerous, like shooting an arrow in the dark. Thinking that no matter what, there was nothing to be done except to resolve this issue, I asked all around and searched on Google. Finally, a friend introduced me to another lawyer. Compared to my former lawyer, he was cheaper. He only charged \$300 per hour. He was a man named Nick, and he said that the previous lawyer was mistaken. He said that we didn't need to wait 90 days and that it was possible to send a 10-day notice. On August 10, 2023, we finally did so. That man had still not left the apartment. Just like that, four months passed.

Then began the real court proceedings. It took a few months for the court to schedule a hearing. We went to the courthouse at the appointed

time on September 8. Although there were many people crowded in the courthouse, it was hushed. We looked at the court schedule displayed by the door of the court, and there were approximately 60 people scheduled to appear that day. I was number 8. On the wall behind the judge's bench was a golden or brass display with the words, "In God we trust." Whatever God is up in the sky, I prayed, "Please bear witness to the truth." Listening to the troubles of the defendants that went before me, only then I realized that this kind of misfortune had not only befallen me. All the people filling this courthouse were also engaged in lawsuits between landlords and tenants. I finally understood the true difficulties of regular American people and therefore felt my own suffering decrease.

My lawyer Nick whispered, "If the squatter doesn't appear in court today, that would be great." But he appeared at the correct time. Because the guy requested additional time, the judge ruled that the case would commence after four months.

On January 16, 2024, without any remorse, he filed a request saying that he was having trouble finding an apartment. With respect and deep hope, I also filed a request that he would vacate the property as quickly as possible. On March 25, 2024, the court replied with a summons to appear again two months and 25 days later. I appeared at the appointed time. That man also appeared. He said that he needed additional time. By the way he carried on crying and gasping, you would think that I had stolen his apartment. These kinds of people who are experts in deceit and trickery infuriate me so much that I felt like I had a fire burning in my stomach but couldn't release the smoke through my mouth. The judge said, "Okay, we'll push back the eviction date three months." He continued moaning about his difficulties and then the judge said, "Then

you definitely need to move within six months.” He agreed. I couldn’t argue with the judge. From seeing how he promised, it seemed as if he really would move out. I submitted to the court that since he entered my home, because he was dirty and brought dogs and homeless people into the building, the building management committee had raised my monthly fees. He said in front of the court that he would take responsibility for those fees, but I never saw a cent. With a deep sigh, I resigned myself to waiting for him to vacate the property on September 25th.

In the meantime, he cost me so much money. One problem after another appeared—like water leaking from the bathroom. The building manager called me again and again, begging me to take responsibility for the apartment. It takes longer for the courts to come to a decision than the pace of a tortoise and my previous optimism slowly disappeared. Thinking that it would be necessary to find my own solution to this problem, one day I called the squatter and beseeched him, “I can give you some money to help with the apartment search, but please give me back my apartment. I am all alone and a mere librarian, so I don’t have a high salary. This apartment in New York is my only property.”

That man said casually, “Those other two women were con artists. I am a believer in Jesus. My grandmother advised me to be a good person. I will give you your apartment back. This weekend, come and we can resolve this.” On June 15, 2024, not able to contain my anticipation, I bought a plane ticket from Boston to New York. On Saturday, it rained all day. I waited by the door for a long time, but he never showed. I called him and asked him what happened. He said, “Today it’s raining, so I can’t move. Come by tomorrow.” Thinking that I would get my apartment back tomorrow, I slept well. The next morning, he called me

and said, “Lhamo, today won’t work. I can’t move.” He may as well have slapped me across the face. I felt so stupid for trusting this man who doesn’t accept the laws of karma or even have any decency. However, this guy is an evil, habitual conman. Forget about respecting me, this man would even break the law, so I realized that my attempts to get my house back were a waste of time and money.

For a single woman all alone in a foreign country, experiencing such physical, emotional and economic difficulties, it would be impossible not to feel badly. I tried to cultivate bodhicitta and perform tonglen¹ meditation as much as I could. When I asked around me, some people frightened me by saying that this would take another few years to be resolved. Others counseled, “No problem—you’ll recover your losses later.” Whatever the case, it was clear that until the karmic debt from my previous lives was paid off, I wouldn’t be able to get rid of him. So I didn’t want to talk about this with anyone.

I had an online friend who was living in India, with whom I usually shared my joys and tribulations. He pretended not to be annoyed even though his ears must have been burning. He gave me both gentle and tough advice telling me that it is necessary to have courage to face difficulties in order to live in the world. Sometimes he would sing meaningful Indian love songs to soothe my mind. From this I felt deeply that he was not just giving friendly soothing words, but that his words were truly from the heart. This friendship and companionship made me determined to continue to fight for justice. Also, my best childhood friend Dechen la, and her family always welcomed me to their home without annoyance and like I was a long-lost guest when I had to go to New York.

¹ Meditation on taking on the sufferings of others and sharing one’s own merit and happiness

They always asked with care about my difficulties, sometimes scolding me with compassion and forcing me to take holidays with them to try to ease my mind. My childhood friend Dadron la also tried to soothe me and whenever Dechen la was not in New York, out of the goodness of her heart, Dadron la accompanied me in my difficulties. My old dharma friend in Boston, Drolkar la, always came to meet me no matter whether I was experiencing joys or tribulations. Likewise, my colleague Dekyi la also supported me out of the goodness of her heart. It's like the proverb, *You know the strength of a stallion when he falls in the mud, you know the value of a friend when you have difficulties*. Isn't that true? Whatever the case, in my life, my online friend and my girlfriends became essential for my happiness.

On September 25, 2024, after waiting six months as was ordered, the case was handed over to the New York City Marshals. The marshal sent a notification, and the date of eviction was set to October 8, 2024. I thought that no matter what, it would be okay because I would get my apartment back after eight months of waiting. I prepared to arrive in New York the following day. That afternoon, my lawyer called me and said, "Lhamo, unfortunately, the court requested the case be returned to them from the marshal. He was granted an additional one-month reprieve." When I told people from Boston about this development, they couldn't believe it and even people from New York said they had never heard of such a thing.

Once again, as was ordered, the case was sent back to the marshal's office and a deadline was set for November 18, 2024. For a second time, the same exact thing happened. This squatter was like a bum wandering around. As the proverb goes, *Beggars assess the character of a dog and*

the good ones get smacked on the back with a stick. It seemed as if this was how he spent his whole life.

I sent an email to my lawyer saying, “Because you are a lawyer, please stand up for the truth. The way you are working is a disgrace to your parents and a waste of your tuition.” I don’t know if he ever read it, but I felt better. Then the court pushed back the date 22 days. And this is how this went on for 23 months. Out of desperation, I sent a letter of complaint to the US president, the governor of New York state, and the mayor of New York City, but this had the same effect as throwing a stone in the ocean.

On January 6, 2025, we went back to court. I had gone through so much to get to this point. When it was time for my testimony, because it had been so difficult to get this opportunity, I deeply pleaded about the physical and mental difficulties I had experienced. Even though the guy pled guilty, he still requested, with shifty eyes, that the eviction date be moved to the end of the month. The judge didn’t grant his request this time. He immediately ordered that a date be set with the marshal. I was both joyous and nervous. Like the old proverb goes, *If a monkey has 18 places to jump, the fox will have 19.* Likewise, I was afraid of what tricks he might still have up his sleeve, and there remained a nagging worry in my heart.

If the Communist Party were to confiscate your land or home, it would be completely seized. With complete certainty, you would be severed from the property. There would be no legal recourse. If your property is invaded in the US, not only is your property trespassed, but all the expenses related to it are the responsibility of the homeowner. If

the eviction of the squatter is postponed, the innocent party will become homeless, discarded on the side of the road. Thinking about this, I became extremely depressed that in this great country there can exist such terrible laws.

When I think about New York police officers, I become angry. Every time I see a New York police officer, I feel a pain, as if I've been struck in the head with a hammer. I think that if they performed their duty honestly many people would avoid this kind of suffering.

So just like it is the nature of planted crops to grow to harvest and for resting wine to ferment, on January 6, 2025, a snowy winter's day, as was ordered by the Queens New York Supreme Court, the marshal gave an order allowing the immediate eviction of that criminal. However, there are so many people with similar issues like me in New York, so it took 15 days for them to set the deadline. Finally, I received a letter stating that he would be evicted on the 21st. Of course I was happy, but I was also wondering what new tricks that man might come up with, whether he would really leave that day, and the like. I spent the whole day with uncontrollable thoughts racing through my mind, making my chest ache. Like the proverb *Not only do they kill the wild yak, but they also make a flag out of his tail* goes, when that man created that much annoyance and pain for me, how could I trust him today? Now I had become unable to be naïve, like someone who has never had their foot pierced by a thorn. Controlling my own mind, I held onto the hope that the truth would prevail and tried to be broadminded.

The day of the eviction, it looked like that squatter's fortunes would turn and he would come to the end of his cunning, deceptive, and

evil tricks. I didn't hear any bad news from him, but I also didn't get the result that I desired. As it is said that people's wishes sometimes fall from the sky, nature took pity on him and the temperature in New York and the surrounding areas became extremely cold, falling to -8 and all legal actions within the city were withdrawn, so he gained a few days.

It snowed a ton, and the temperature continued to be extremely cold, so I'm positive that he was holding onto hope that he would be allowed to continue staying in the apartment. Because I had been smacked in the face so many times in the past, I waited until the last minute and didn't buy a ticket until the morning of the 24th to avoid wasting more money. Up to the last day, I hadn't heard any bad news. Then when it was time for me to go retrieve the keys, I couldn't find a ticket. Although there were some tickets available, they were twice as expensive as usual. Although I wasn't used to driving my own car on the highway for long distances, like the proverb says, *the auntie has to be able to cross the bridge she built*. I had no choice but to drive myself. Without wasting my breath or energy, I went to New York, picturing myself achieving my goal, and fortunately arrived without any issues.

From the vast sky, cloaked in a blanket of white, fell snowflakes like wool, fluttering bit by bit into the earth's embrace. The way that each snowflake dissolved before my eyes, I felt deeply that these were like flowers of consolation tossed by my late, beloved parents. When I saw the way the whole ground was covered as if by a single completely white khata, I felt so strongly as if I had arrived back one more time in my own country of Tibet. Within the freezing cold, I found warmth and happiness. I felt that it was a good sign. As commanded under the law, not only had I not received any rent for the past two years, I wasn't even

allowed to go near the front door of my own home, so I was thrilled to finally be in control of my own property. Whatever the case, I think that what is said by the great masters of the past must be true—if you own a horse, your suffering will be the size of a horse. If you own a sheep, your suffering will be the size of a sheep. The suffering that I experienced is the suffering of having something. I gained some understanding that wealth is the deceptive source of our downfall. When I thought about what benefits can be accumulated within samsara and the disadvantages that arise from within samsara, I thought again and again about fleeing to perform the holy dharma.

It took three and a half hours to get there. Unlike Boston, in New York there were only traces left of the snow. I arrived at Diversity Plaza, which we Tibetans call Ü-Rang Plaza, in Jackson Heights, at exactly noon. Ü-Rang Plaza is a gathering place in New York of many different ethnic groups—Tibetans, Bhutanese, Himalayans, Indians, Nepalis, Mexicans, and Middle Easterners. It's said that there are speakers of nearly 240 languages there. At first, when Tibetans were initially applying for their residency permits, this small, local market plaza was a place to discuss our mutual joys and pains, so it received the name Comfort Plaza.

Gradually, we were all released from the suffering of residency permits. Most people either became single or grew up into young adults and all fostered hopes to find a compatible partner to marry, so the plaza became a meeting place when we had free time, and it then received the name Hope Plaza. After a few years, most were freed from worries about basic necessities, like housing, food, clothing, etc. Only then did attention turn to Tibetan society. Some people supported the Middle Way or Ü policies and others the Rangzen policies, and so on. People often

gathered there to discuss political issues, so the place received the name Ü-Rang Plaza. After a while, everyone's knowledge of international affairs broadened, so the plaza became a place for discussing various affairs, and it received the name Busy-Body Plaza.

In the past, the smell of Indian spices wafted over the plaza, but on that day, it was filled with the smell of Tibetan dumplings, momos, and other Tibetan foods. There are around 20 Tibetan restaurants there. As usual, I went to Lhasa Restaurant near Busy-Body Plaza to get a bunch of Tibetan food. The taste so reminded me of my mother's handmade, nutritious food. My apartment was really close—only three subway stops away from Busy-Body Plaza. As I was about to arrive at my apartment, the marshal called and said he was running ahead of schedule. Half running and half walking, trotting along, I arrived at my apartment door before the marshal. When I entered the lobby of the building, I met the grim-faced squatter as he was leaving. Although he was vibrating with hatred, this time I had the weight of the law behind me. Like the saying goes, *if you know the depth of the water, you can catch a fish*, without any hesitation, I asked with confidence, “Hey you! Where are the keys?” With a frown, he tried to blow me off, saying, “According to my lawyer, I still have a few days to stay.” As it's often said, *if you try to talk reason to a scoundrel, he won't listen or understand. He will reply with nonsense and then you'll both lose the thread*, he continued to arrogantly try to postpone his eviction.

But when I looked carefully at his face, I could see that this time his countenance was different, and his voice was weaker. Right away, an energetic young man adorned in a military outfit and two powerful Black plainclothes officers arrived with a dignified air. The young male

marshal called out my name and asked, “Are you case number xxx?” “Yes sir. The squatter is this man here,” I said, pointing at the man. The marshal barely gave him a glance and paid him no attention. That thief, who used to seem as menacing as a huge yak, changed into an extremely weak little man. It appeared to me as if he lost a few inches before my eyes.

From that time forward, he had no right to cross the threshold of my home. Thinking I finally had the pleasure of getting payback, I was overjoyed. The marshal, with a glance at the guy, opened the door and changed the locks. Then he examined and inventoried the squatter’s belongings. Although there was nothing valuable, there were nearly 100 black garbage bags of junk. That jerk had turned my apartment into a dump. The young marshal said with amazement, “We’ve had to move out a lot of jerks, but I’ve never seen someone as filthy as this.” The two other officers also shook their heads in surprise, saying, “Wow, I guess people like this really do exist!”

Then the building super showed up and said, “You think this is bad? That guy filled up the entire dumpster with his garbage. Being able to get this guy to move out, I feel as happy as if I were the landlord awarded this eviction.” He continued, “He would often bring a bunch of people over and create huge problems.” After the marshal completed his detailed overview, he announced that the guy would have one hour sometime within the next 30 days to deal with his belongings. On the door, the marshal posted a large notice stating that on this day and month, the Supreme Court had ordered that man’s eviction.

Again, I had to wait 30 days, but this time I felt much more

relaxed than I had previously. I left with a copy of the notice, so if the squatter tried to take possession of the apartment again, I could show the police this notice and it would be clear that no one would have the right to steal my property again. I turned to the marshal and, wanting to give them a gesture of thanks, said, “You guys must be tired. Please let me get you a cup of coffee.” Finally, I saw them break into a smile for the first time saying, “We have three evictions to conduct today.” The way they said that they have between three and five of such evictions every day, I imagined that in their eyes this situation was totally normal.

On the next day, that thief arrived and grabbed a few valuable things and said to throw away the rest. From that day forward, he faded away like a rainbow. It took a long time to clean up and repaint the apartment. I received help from a few talented friends who volunteered to help me out of the pure goodness of their hearts—some painted, some repaired the kitchen, some repaired the bathroom, and so on. Although I could never properly express my gratitude to them, I can never forget their kindness, held like a bouquet of flowers in my heart.

This firsthand account of my experience is only valuable in that it might help others going through something similar. The main takeaway from this essay is this: *There will be laughter in times of happiness, tears in times of sorrow, glares in times of anger, and poetic words in times of love.* I propose that, in this world of happiness and sorrow, from the very beginning to the end, the only dangling bridge that tethers us human beings to life is facing suffering.